

VZCZCXYZ0008
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHGB #0317 0380515
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 070515Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1598
INFO RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC//CTC//
RHMFIUU/FBI WASHINGTON DC//INTD/CTD/CT WATCH//
RUEAHLA/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC
RUEILB/NCTC WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS BAGHDAD 000317

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [CVIS](#) [CMGT](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: VISAS FOR IRAQIS - A STRATEGIC VULNERABILITY

TO DEPUTY SECRETARY LEW AND UNDERSECRETARY FOR MANAGEMENT FROM
AMBASSADOR CROCKER

REF: 08 BAGHDAD 3537

¶1. (U) As we proceed to implement the Strategic Framework Agreement, the United States faces a significant obstacle to achieving its objective of an Iraq that is a stable ally with effective institutions accountable to its people. That obstacle is the 120 to 150-day wait time required of most Iraqi visa applicants.

¶2. (U) The SFA's Joint Coordinating Committees are off and running. For example, this week, seven Presidents of Iraqi universities arrived in Washington for meetings with U.S. counterparts to create educational partnerships. In January, representatives of 25 American universities came to Iraq to recruit students. This fall, the first several hundred of an eventual 6-7,000 Iraqis per year will come to U.S. universities on government scholarships. In addition, the Government of Iraq has budgeted 2.5 million dollars to match USG funding for Iraqi student Fulbright scholarships.

¶3. (U) These exchanges go to the heart of what America seeks to achieve in Iraq: long-term institutional linkages that anchor Iraq firmly in the West and establish the basis for an enduring partnership. We are poised for failure, however, because we cannot bring Iraqis - and especially students and exchange visitors - to the United States in a timely way.

¶4. (U) Current regulations require that 90-95% of all Iraqi visa applications be submitted for a Security Advisory Opinion (SAO). This includes all student visa applicants. While the Visa Office has made efforts to clear F-student applicants in under two months, many F applicants take considerably longer. Government scholarship students applying for J-visas also face waits of 4-5 months or more. Fulbright student candidates, our highest priority, routinely have to wait 5 months or more for clearances. There is no way that any student in the world can receive college admissions and all the requisite paperwork four months or more in advance of the date of travel. SAO wait times also heavily impact Cultural Exchange programs. USG sponsored J-applicants must wait 3-5 months for SAO clearance. Given the challenges of the Iraq environment, it is nearly impossible to budget for, recruit and interview candidates and still allow enough time for SAO clearance before program start dates.

¶7. (U) We have the opportunity to bring thousands of young Iraqis every year for university degrees in the United States, and in doing so, build the long term partnership we have never had with Iraq. We risk losing that opportunity due to our visa regulations. Iraq is a strategic partner, yet we impose visa restrictions on them that we do not on adversaries such as Iran, North Korea and Syria. F-1 visa applicants from these states do not require a mandatory SAO, and the triggers are narrower.

¶8. (U) It is in our national interest that we remove F-1 visa applicants from the mandatory SAO triggers and prioritize all Iraqi

F-1 student and J-1 exchange visitor visa applicants. The SAO triggers for Baath Party membership, GoI employment and military service also need to be rationalized to discretely target true security threats, as opposed to being so broad they envelop 95% of applicants.

19. (U) As I leave Iraq, these measures would put our bilateral relationship on a surer footing for the future and help secure Iraq's longer-term stability.

CROCKER